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Book Review: The Bar U and Canadian Ranching History

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The Bar U and Canadian Ranching History. By Simon M. Evans. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 2004. xix + 376 pp. Photographs, maps, illustrations, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. \$34.95 paper.

Located almost directly south of Calgary, Alberta, the North West Cattle Company, or Bar U, is one of the longest surviving large ranches on the Canadian Prairies. Founded in 1881 during a land rush, it was one of several to acquire large leases on government land. Under the management of Fred Stimson, an experienced farmer from Quebec, the Bar U prospered, partly because of cheap land but mainly because of solid management and good marketing and transportation strategies.

In 1902, the consortium of Quebec investors, including the Allan shipping magnates, sold the ranch to George Lane, a self-made entrepreneur. Like Stimson, Lane was an excellent and innovative manager, who added calf rearing, alfalfa growing, and Percheron breeding enterprise as well as some irrigation to the ranching operation. Lane also made favorable arrangements with a transportation company. In the end, however, he overextended himself in a vast grain farm at the very time that prices plummeted and wages rocketed.

Two years after Lane's death in 1925, Pat Burns, the wealthy packing plant operator, bought the bankrupt Bar U and established one of the first fully integrated meat industries. By breeding and feeding cattle, transporting them to Calgary finishing feed lots, processing the carcasses in his plant, and distributing the meat to his retail outlets, Burns controlled an entire industry from the country to the kitchen range.

Evans has produced a detailed and lavishly illustrated history of the Bar U ranch and has situated it well in the economic history of the Canadian West. While he agrees that the financial leadership of the large ranches came from central Canadian and British investors and managers, he argues against others who maintain that the workforce was primarily from the United States and that on the ground the

industry adopted mostly American techniques. Evans also asserts that, contrary to some interpretations, large open range ranches survived well into the twentieth century. Interestingly, he also suggests that the devastating winter of 1906-07 had a slighter impact on some ranchers than previously believed. In fact, he argues that the number of cattle had already begun to drop in the first years of the twentieth century. The real villain in ranching history was not the weather but the flood of government-encouraged settlers who appropriated much of the range lands and produced a more valuable product. Wheat drove out meat.

Obviously a labor of love, *The Bar U* is a romantic overview, offering little sweat and tedium. Its emphasis is on the three managers who, according to Evans, are giants on the landscape. That said, the book will remain a valuable resource for all those engaged in the history of the North American Great Plains.

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